

I'M HEPATITIS B Positive, Now What?

What Is Hepatitis B?

Hepatitis B is a viral infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis B virus (HBV). Hepatitis B can lead to lifelong (chronic) infection and can cause serious liver damage including cirrhosis and liver cancer. More than 90 percent of infants infected perinatally or in the first year of life will develop chronic hepatitis B infection, whereas 5 to 10 percent of acutely infected older children and adults will develop chronic, lifelong infection.

What Does Having Hepatitis B Mean for My Health?

If you have acute hepatitis B, you may successfully clear the virus from your system and you would be protected from any future hepatitis B infection. Individuals who are unable to clear HBV develop chronic infection. The risk for progression to chronic infection is related inversely to age at the time of infection, that is, HBV becomes chronic in most infected infants. By contrast, most adults recover completely from acute HBV infection and do not become chronically infected.

Most people chronically infected with hepatitis B can expect to live long and healthy lives. Individuals with chronic HBV may not develop symptoms for up to 30 years. Damage to the liver can silently occur during this time. The risk for developing liver cancer among those who are chronically infected with HBV increases as a person gets older or if they have been diagnosed with cirrhosis. To promote a healthy liver, it is recommended individuals infected with HBV avoid alcohol and smoking. You should talk to your doctor before taking any prescription, over-the-counter medication or herbal remedies. Although there is no special diet for people who have chronic hepatitis B, a healthy, well-balanced diet that is low-fat and includes plenty of vegetables is recommended. You may want to avoid eating raw shellfish since they can contain bacteria that are harmful to your liver.

What Are the First Steps I Should Take to Manage My Infection?

If you are positive for HBV, you should visit with your healthcare provider to evaluate your hepatitis B status and the health of your liver. Your doctor will probably want to see you at least once or twice a year to monitor your hepatitis B and determine if you would benefit from treatment. Educating yourself on how hepatitis B is transmitted and factors that may affect the progression of disease is also very important when you are first diagnosed.

How Do I Find a Doctor?

In North Dakota, most individuals infected with HBV are treated by specialists such as infectious disease physicians, gastroenterologists or hepatologists (liver specialists). If you need assistance finding a healthcare provider in your area, please contact your primary care provider or call the North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) at 701.328.2378.

Is There a Cure for Hepatitis B?

No. There is no medication available to treat acute hepatitis B. During this short-term infection, doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition and fluids, although some people may need to be hospitalized. People with chronic hepatitis B should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease and evaluated for possible treatment. For chronic hepatitis B there are treatments that can help slow the progression of liver disease.

How Is Hepatitis B Managed?

People with chronic HBV infection require regular monitoring to prevent liver damage or liver cancer. Individuals should avoid alcohol because it can cause additional liver damage.

What Happens If I Don't Get Treated?

Chronic hepatitis B is a serious disease that can result in long-term health problems, including liver damage, liver failure, liver cancer or even death. Approximately 1,800 people die every year from hepatitis B-related liver disease.

For more information, call 800.472.2180 or

visit www.ndhealth.gov/disease/hepatitis.

I'M HEPATITIS B Positive, Now What?

How Can I Protect Myself and Others?

If you are infected you can pass the virus, even if you don't have any symptoms, on to others. It is important to take certain precautions to prevent this from happening. HBV is transmitted through activities that involve puncture through the skin or contact with body fluids (e.g., semen, saliva). Individuals who may have been exposed should be vaccinated for hepatitis B to protect themselves. Sexual partners and those living in the same household should be tested for hepatitis B and receive the hepatitis B vaccine.

In addition, it is important to keep all cuts covered and avoid sharing any sharp instruments such as razors, toothbrushes or earrings, etc. Hepatitis B is not transmitted casually, and it cannot be spread through sneezing, coughing, hugging or eating food prepared by someone who is infected with HBV. Any blood spills, including dried blood, should be cleaned using a dilution of one part household bleach to 10 parts of water for disinfecting the area. Gloves should be used when cleaning up any blood spills.

I'm Pregnant. How Does Hepatitis B Affect My Baby?

If a pregnant woman has hepatitis B, she can pass the infection to her baby during birth. This can be prevented through a series of vaccinations and Hepatitis B Immune Globulin (HBIG) for her baby beginning at birth. Without vaccination, babies born to women with hepatitis B virus infection can develop chronic infection.

Am I Immune to Hepatitis B After I Recover?

If you recover from an acute infection of HBV—that is, you do not progress to chronic infection—you will have lasting immunity against reinfection. However, patients with resolved infection who become immunosuppressed (e.g., from chemotherapy or medication) might, albeit rarely, experience reactivation of HBV infection with symptoms of acute illness.

Do I Need to be Excluded from Work, Child Care, School or Other Activities?

No. HBV is not spread through food or water, sharing eating utensils, breastfeeding, hugging, kissing, hand holding, coughing or sneezing. No evidence exists of transmission of HBV by casual contact in the workplace, and transmission occurs rarely in childcare settings. All sores and wounds need to be covered, however. If there is uncontrollable bleeding, individuals should be excluded until all sores and wounds can be covered.

Who Do I Need to Tell About My Infection?

You do not have to tell anyone about your HBV infection unless they are at risk of infection through blood or body fluid exposure. You should tell your current sexual partner(s), household members and any needle-sharing partners. Primary routes of HBV transmission are sexual contact and needle sharing by injection drug users. Testing and vaccination is also recommended for household contacts of persons with chronic HBV infection, including unvaccinated children.

How Do I Tell Others?

Telling family members about hepatitis B is important, but it can be difficult if you're not properly prepared. First, you must take immediate action to make sure your household members are not at risk of HBV infection including practicing safer sex, implementing universal precautions, and making sure household and immediate family members are tested for HBV and vaccinated. Learning the facts about hepatitis B and sharing educational material will help.

Remember, you don't have to tell anyone until you are ready as long as they are not at risk of infection. Care and support from friends and loved ones can be very beneficial, however.

Additional Information

- www.ndhealth.gov/disease/hepatitis
- www.cdc.gov/hepatitis
- www.hepB.org